



Why Should I Care about Bats?

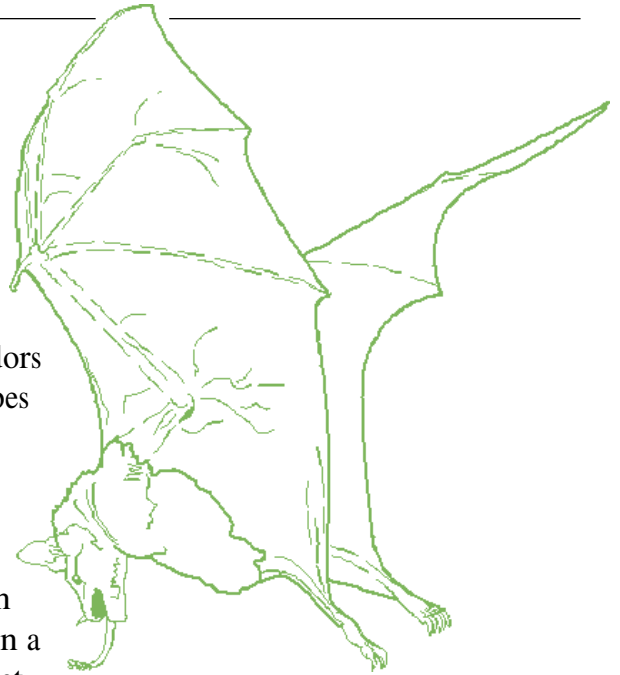
Worldwide, bats play essential roles in keeping populations of night-flying insects in balance. Just one bat can catch hundreds of insects in an hour, and large

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colonies catch tons of insects nightly, including beetle and moth species that cost American farmers and foresters billions of dollars annually, not to mention mosquitoes in our backyards. In a single mid-summer night, the 20 million free-tailed bats from Bracken Cave in central Texas eat more than 200 tons of insects!

Throughout the tropics, the seed dispersal and pollination activities of fruit- and nectar-eating bats are vital to the survival of rain forests, with some bats acting as “keystone”

species. Each of these species of bats supports plants that are crucial to entire ecosystems. Many plants bloom at night, using unique odors and special flower shapes that attract bats. The famous baobab tree of the eastern African savannas is a good example. Only bats can approach from below in a manner likely to contact the flower’s reproductive organs and achieve pollination.



Wild varieties of many of the world’s most economically valuable crop plants also rely on bats for survival. Some of the better-known commercial products include fruits such as bananas, breadfruit, avocados, dates, figs, peaches, and mangoes. Others include cloves, cashews, carob, balsa wood, and even tequila.

We already know that more than 300 plant species in the Old World tropics alone rely on the pollinating and seed dispersal services of bats, and additional bat-plant relationships are constantly being discovered. These plants

provide more than 450 economically important products, valued in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually. The value of tropical bats in reforestation alone is enormous. Seeds dropped by bats can account for up to 95 percent of forest regrowth on cleared land. Performing this essential role puts these bats among the most important seed-dispersing animals of both the Old and New World tropics.

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